

# **THE DISASTER PRESS CONFERENCE: RESPONDING TO THE MEDIA IN AN EMERGENCY**

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Officials in public safety and emergency management organizations are responsible for ensuring that the affected public receives accurate and timely information during an emergency. Armed with good information, people are better able to make good decisions and, by doing so, contribute to the overall response goal of saving lives and protecting property. One of the primary ways for emergency management officials to provide this vital information to the public is through the media. One of the tools they use is the press conference. However, many public officials when they hear the words, “press conference,” feel apprehensive. The pen-ultimate press conference is when the press meets the president, which Larry Speakes compared to a “Roman Circus” (Mountains out of Washington molehills, 1985). No wonder ordinary executives, including those at the city level or county level, find the press conference intimidating. This paper examines the history of press conferences in public service, looks at the role of the press conference in emergencies, and makes recommendations to emergency management officials for using it effectively.

## **Greater adversarialness**

A growing trend exists in English-speaking countries towards adversarial questioning in news interviews. Journalists formulate their questions in an increasingly challenging or ‘hostile’ manner which was rarely seen decades ago. This is particularly true in broadcast interviews with politicians or public figures.

Burriss (1989) explored the “changing relationship between the press and Presidents by looking at the questions reporters ask and the answers Presidents give to those questions” (468). Over the period of time studied from 1963 (President Johnson) to 1988 (President Reagan), the length of questions and statements made by reporters, and the length of presidential responses increased significantly. While Burriss couldn’t give the reasons for the changes, he surmised, partly because of the dishonesty of the Nixon presidency, that reporters may have become less trusting of the presidency and more aggressive in their questioning. Reporters are more arrogant and combative, according to one viewpoint. The world has also become more complex. Reporters tend to give longer statements with their questions and the length of presidential responses is much longer.

Ekström (2009) showed how President George W. Bush used a number of techniques to control reporters in press conferences. He interrupted to control who would be able to ask questions, disagreed and rejected criticism, demonstrated certainty and conviction, and made jokes with the journalists. Sequences of jokes and laughter strengthened the interactive power of the President, created affiliations, and questioned the expected neutrality of journalism.

In order to measure the degree of “deference or adversarialness” of questions in media interviews, Clayman and Heritage (2002) developed a model for analysis, which they used to examine press

conferences of Presidents Eisenhower and Reagan. It consisted of four basic dimensions of adversarial questioning: (a) initiative (the practice of questioning in which journalists 'set a more independent and constraining agenda' for interviewees while leaving the latter less leeway to pursue their own agendas), (b) directness (referring to the aggressiveness or hostility of journalistic questioning), (c) assertiveness (the practice of questioning in which journalists 'push for a particular response' from the interviewee) and (d) hostility (the practice of questioning which is overtly critical of interviewee's ability or questioning his or her accountability). The four dimensions are further divided into ten indicators, i.e. question complexity, question cascades, follow-up questions, other referencing question frames, self-referencing question frames, preface tilt, negatively formulated questions, preface hostility, global hostility and accountability questions. Clayman and Heritage's study suggested increased adversarialness in journalists' treatment of U.S. Presidents Eisenhower and Reagan, based on major differences in the adversarial dimension and question design indicators in the two U.S. press conferences.

Officials' responses have also changed with the increased adversarialness of reporters' questions. Based on an analysis of 33 televised British political interviews, Bull (1994) developed a set of guidelines for differentiating between questions, replies, and non-replies. Responses to questions in political interviews are not simply dichotomized into replies and non-replies, but examined on a continuum. Politicians choose what question to answer and whether or not to answer it fully or only partially. Using a different approach, Harris (1991) arrived at a similar conclusion based on the analysis of three dimensions of answering, i.e. direct, indirect and challenges, from officials. She concluded that politicians tend to give evasive answers in front of the media, based on her finding that the number of direct answers given by politicians (barely over 39%) were considerably lower than any other groups of interviewees (averaging over 67%). In sum, studies on question-answer sequences in broadcast interviews (including press conferences) seem to suggest that interviewers are more likely to use more aggressive questions, and politicians are more likely to give evasive answers than other groups of respondents.

Tingting Sun (2010) examined adversarial questioning and answering strategies in Chinese press conferences and found similar trends, indicating that adversarial questioning is also emerging in Chinese broadcast press conferences. The study examined ten Chinese government press conferences and coded all the question turns based on the four dimensions of adversarial style (initiative, directness, assertiveness and hostility) and a modified set of nine indicators for the design of adversarial questions. Of the nine indicators, two were newly identified in the Chinese context, i.e. target-oriented questioning and question tilt. More adversarialness is occurring despite traditional values such as 'face-saving' and 'face-giving' in the Chinese socio-cultural context. Chinese journalists are asking more challenging questions that employ complex and target-oriented question designs. However, Tingting concludes that foreign journalists are much more aggressive than their Chinese counterparts in asking politicians challenging questions, in particular hostile questions. This may be partly because of greater news freedom in the west and a desire among the local Chinese journalistic community to safeguard national dignity. Chinese officials address the challenging questions in a firm and candid manner. They employ various strategies such as prefacing with an initial comment on the preceding question, challenging the

credibility of the interviewer or the appropriateness of the question, using idioms, quotations, and pointing out misconceptions.

## Good models of press conference behavior

The “Giuliani model” press conference has received a lot of praise and has become an ideal for crisis communication. Twice a day during the aftermath of 9/11 and the following anthrax attacks, New York’s mayor would stand with other officials and respond to media questions. He showed he was clearly in charge, but he also displayed “both empathy and mastery over information.” He “helped the city cope with the unbearable by bearing it himself.” When he called on officials next to him, he reassured the public by letting them know he trusted those who worked with him. He supplemented the press conferences with other communication tools. During the anthrax response, the city broadcast faxes to hospitals, disseminated fact sheets, maintained a website, and a 24/7 hotline. The mayor constantly communicated with elected officials and community groups and provided expert information to the press to supplement what was said in press conferences (Mullin, 2003, 15-16).

Ostman, Babcock, and Fallert (1981) examined President John F. Kennedy’s use of the press conference. President Kennedy “genuinely liked reporters” and many of his best friends were reporters. He held more press conferences on average than other presidents and he listened carefully to the questions reporters asked. While his answers were not always detailed, he “demonstrated time and again that he had listened, often by using an exact word or phrase which the reporter had voiced in the question” (580). Ostman, Babcock, and Fallert (1981) hypothesized that “good” questions from reporters would elicit “good” answers from the president. As the basis for analysis, they used 16 suggestions for good “interview” questions derived from a review of research. They examined three hundred question and answer sets from 62 press conferences. Reporters who asked questions in keeping with the textbook suggestions generally received the answers they desired. They got “good” answers when they asked questions “without words with double meanings, where time, place and context were specified, where all alternatives were specified, where the unfamiliar was explained, where opinions and self-perceptions were expressed when wanted, where immediate experience was referred to, where emotionally-charged words were not used, and where the President stuck to the topic and subjects broached” (580).

**TABLE 1. SUGGESTIONS FOR GOOD REPORTER QUESTIONS (Ostman, Babcock, and Fallert, 1981)**

<b>Suggestions for good reporter questions</b>	<b>Findings from Pres. Kennedy’s press conferences</b>
1. Avoid words with double meanings.	Kennedy responded with double meanings more often when reporters asked questions with double meanings.
2. Specify exactly the time.	Provided good answers.
3. Specify exactly the place.	Provided good answers.
4. Specify exactly the context.	Provided good answers.
5. Make explicit all alternatives, or make none of them explicit.	Provided good answers.
6. Preface unfamiliar or technical subjects with explanations or illustrations.	Provided good answers.

7. Ask questions in terms of the respondent's own immediate and recent experience rather than generalities.	Provided good answers.
8. Ask questions for facts about a topic of interest.	Direct requests stimulated factual answers more often but not significantly more than when questions made no request for facts.
9. Ask questions which elicit opinions and attitudes of the respondent—what is thought or felt about a particular subject at a particular point in time.	Provided good answers.
10. Ask questions which elicit respondent's self-perceptions—the respondent's evaluation of his or her own behavior or thoughts in relation to others.	Provided good answers.
11. Avoid "loaded" or "leading" questions (those which suggest to the respondent the answer which the asker wants to hear).	While loaded questions were asked by reporters 40 times out of the 300 questions analyzed (13.3%), President Kennedy responded with "correct" answers on 16 of these occasions, ignoring the loaded or leading question.
12. Avoid questions which contain emotionally-charged words.	When questions avoided emotionally-charged words, reporters got good answers.
13. Avoid embarrassing questions. They often lead to untrue answers.	When asked embarrassing questions, Kennedy showed embarrassment 11 of 68 times (16.2%). He also showed embarrassment in 15 other answers, to questions that were not meant to be embarrassing. The findings suggested President Kennedy consistently demonstrated honesty and openness in answering questions.
14. Adhere to the principles of good grammar when asking questions.	The President responded with good grammar even when reporters used poor grammar.
15. Avoid multi-part questions, which introduce more than one subject.	Multi-part questions led to multi-part answers, giving reporters a broad range of opinions and reflections which may be helpful in reporting. Reporters asked questions which contained from one to five topics, with a mean slightly over two. The President responded in answers of up to 10 topics, with a mean of 2.25.
16. Avoid long questions.	The shortest question was one word and the longest was 119 words. The average number of words in reporters' questions was 42.7. President Kennedy's answers ranged from no words at all (an option chosen only once in 300 times sampled) to 751 words. The average number of words in the President's answers was 117.56.

These findings from Ostman, Babcock, and Fallert (1981) provide public officials a set of rules to follow when anticipating questions and when providing statements or answers to questions. Officials should be

clear about time, place and context of events, factual and explicit about details and avoid emotional or embarrassing and loaded or leading questions. Be prepared for questions asking for opinions and attitudes as well as self-perceptions. Use good grammar and avoid multi-part answers and long answers.

## **Using the press conference in emergency situations**

The press conference is an opportunity for public officials to show the media and the public that they are “organized, effective, and responsible ... in the face of disaster” (Folkerts, 1999). Regularly scheduled press conferences through the course of the crisis can keep the press up-to-date on developments and provide them with vital information to pass along, thus allaying public concerns and preparing them to deal with the emergency situation. In catastrophes, emergency personnel and health facilities will not be able to meet the needs of everyone affected. While first responders may not be able to reach all members of the public, the media’s outreach will provide information to protect them and their property.

Effective response to disasters and good media relations begin long before the emergency situation. At the time of the crisis, during the disaster press conference, it is too late to develop a working relationship with the local media. The relationship begins at the planning stage and during training and exercises. If the media are not able to be part of training, they can at least be brought in to report on the preparation process. Dealing with disasters is not only response, but also preparation and planning, mitigation and recovery (FEMA, 2009).

## **Other approaches instead of holding a press conference**

Strenski (1976) presented information on ways to determine whether a press briefing or press conference is warranted and if it is how to make it a successful one. He indicated that “every situation requires case-by-case judgment” to determine if it is newsworthy or not. Not all situations call for a press conference. For example, if the goal is to get across a point of view or establish a personality, instead of a press briefing, one-on-one interviews should be considered. If the message is technical, again a one-on-one interview with the right technical resource, talking to the right editor backed up with an adequate background document, would be far more effective than a press conference.

Another approach that is becoming more commonplace is the telephonic press conference. Reporters phone in using an 800 number, listen to a statement by the official, and then have an opportunity to ask questions. Reporters are put in a queue in the order they sign up to ask questions. They get an opportunity to ask one question and a follow-up. They listen to other reporters’ questions and the officials’ answers. The one disadvantage for reporters is that they can’t interrupt to ask a question. The press conference organizers have greater control of the media room (Shepard, 1995).

## **Preparing for the press conference**

Robertson (2002) interviewed coaches or media training professionals to find out their advice for executives who face the media in an interview or press conference. He found the following:

- Preparation helps overcome the fear of being interviewed. Learn to speak clearly and concisely in public.
- It doesn't help to refuse to be interviewed. Reporters will persist until they get the story. It is better you tell your story rather than someone else.
- Understand the mind-set of reporters, and their needs. For example, be aware of their time requirements.
- Get to know the reporters' publications. Ask questions about the purpose of the interview before agreeing to go on air.
- Don't be passive or reactive. "Your first priority is to get across your message."
- Determine what you want to say and put it into two or three main points. Prepare appropriate one-liners which can be quoted as sound bites. Covello, Wojtecki, and Peters (2002) recommends messages be 10 seconds long, about 30 words.
- Be honest, but keep on message. If asked a question off topic, rather than say "no comment," go back to the key message. Use quotable one-liners to bring the reporter back on topic.
- If the reporter has a different agenda, reemphasize your message. Confront the situation, saying something like "I'm not sure you're hearing what we're saying here."
- If reporters are not getting the answers, they want they may keep asking the same question different ways. "Often they rephrase questions to obtain additional information or better understand what you are trying to say, not to harass or pester" (Folkerts, 1999).

Social conditioning suggests we have to answer questions. That is not always true, writes Robertson. Also, don't feel you have to respond if there is a pause.

Folkerts (1999) advised: "Remember that reporters have deadlines to meet and that stonewalling them or refusing to answer questions may result in undesired perceptions of your [organization's] actions. Even if it is not justified, silence can also imply guilt."

## **Anticipating questions**

One key to effective press conferences is to anticipate the questions the press will ask. Journalism students are taught to ask questions following the 5W1H rule. The five Ws are who, where, when, what, and why. The one H is how. Rudyard Kipling (n.d.) immortalized this rule in the poem:

I KEEP six honest serving-men  
 (They taught me all I knew);  
 Their names are What and Why and When  
 And How and Where and Who.

When anticipating questions, these six words should be used as the basis for preparing for the press conference. Covello, Wojtecki, and Peters (2002) add, "Experience shows that journalists are likely to ask six types of questions in a crisis (who, what, where, when, why, how) that relate to three broad topics: (1) what happened? (2) What caused it to happen? (3) What does it mean?" They suggest emergency managers use these questions as a start to develop simple questions and answers or full message maps.

They also list 77 specific questions that may apply to any type of crisis. Here is a sampling of questions they suggest for a terrorist-generated smallpox outbreak:

- How contagious is smallpox?
- Can everyone be vaccinated?
- What are the signs and symptoms of smallpox?
- Who's in charge?
- Why is smallpox a good weapon?
- What's being done to prepare?
- What kind of medical care will be available? Is there enough?
- What resources will be used to identify and respond to an outbreak?
- Could terrorists make a strain that you couldn't protect against?

## Conclusions

A key to effective community response in an emergency is good public information. The press is one of primary ways of reaching the public in a disaster. The press conference can be a valuable tool in keeping the media current and providing the public up-to-date information in a catastrophe. Anticipating media questions is important in meeting information needs of the media and the public. While most communities prepare extensively in the event of a disaster, "how many of them are prepared to face the media when tragedy strikes? Who will face the press and what will they say? Or, perhaps more importantly, how will they say it?" (Folkerts, 1999)

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